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Fall 2003

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Huelin, Scott, "The Promise, Perils, and Practices of Multiperspectivism" (2003). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 123.

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The Promise, Perils, and Practices of Multiperspectivism

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The modern university has, at best, an ambivalent relation to multiperspectivism. In the seventeenth century, when European universities finalized the break with their medieval past, a century and a half of religious wars had made multiperspectivism a pressing intellectual and social problem, one that, it was argued, could be overcome only with rigorous intellectual method (Toulmin 69-80, Stout 46-47). In our own day, the academy widely celebrates multiperspectivism as a means to achieve the legitimate ends of higher education or, in some cases, as one of those ends itself. Contemporary reflection on academic practice routinely cites notions of diversity, pluralism, or multiculturalism in justifying or modifying curricula, establishing new programs of study, hiring faculty, or admitting students. Furthermore, the recent Supreme Court decision on affirmative action in the University of Michigan's Law School admissions policy grants legal sanction to these practices. Writing for the majority, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor argued that both the university and the state have "a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body," benefits which clearly include the ready availability of a multiplicity of perspectives to inform and animate classroom discussion (*Grutter v. Bollinger*). Ironically, the Supreme Court's ruling simultaneously indicates how far the modern university has evolved since the historical moment of its birth and how deeply problematic the practice of pluralism has been and continues to be for higher education.

Since intellectual pluralism has served, in the history of the modern university, as both a problem needing a solution and an object of our aspiration, we would do well to attend to both the promise and perils of multiperspectivism in higher education today. The best way to do so, it seems to me, is to examine in some detail the practices of an institution keenly aware of both the bane and blessing of multiperspectivism. It so happens that the institution with which I am most familiar—Christ College, the honors college of Valparaiso University—is just such a place. The Freshman Program at Christ College centers upon a sixteen-credit, two-semester, team-taught course called *Texts and Contexts: Traditions of Human Thought*. The course incorporates many of the features found in successful honors curricula around the country: common readings of challenging texts in small seminars, interdisciplinary modes of inquiry, weekly plenary lectures, and a rigorous emphasis on writing. Beyond these noble and salutary activities, Christ College freshmen also undertake two major common endeavors. In the fall semester, our first-year students invent,

script, score, and produce an original piece of musical theater. In the spring, they wrestle with questions of local, national, and international importance in four public Cambridge-style debates. If learning the discourses and practices of the academic life can be likened to learning a language, the Freshman Program's instructional mode clearly is immersion.

The Christ College Freshman Program seeks quite deliberately to model for and nurture in its students the kind of intellectual humility that makes possible the best kind of multiperspectivism, by which I mean the ability and the inclination to attend carefully and empathetically to people, texts, arguments, and artistic works that are wholly or largely foreign and to comprehend them on their own terms. The first task, it seems to me, of freshman general education is to foster in our students just this kind of openness to the unfamiliar. The Freshman Program includes a number of ancient authors (e.g. Aristotle, Augustine), Eastern texts (e.g. *Mencius*, *Zhuangzi*), and difficult modern texts (e.g. Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*) precisely for this reason: They are, each for their own reasons, quite alien to contemporary students. Whether this alienation is historical, traditional, conceptual, or rhetorical in origin, it says to our students, "Yours is not the only way of seeing the world." Student responses to this challenge range broadly from indifference to bewilderment to inquisitiveness. At their best, our students respond with considerable attentiveness and empathetic imagination, but even the well-meaning student, eager to overcome the estrangement of an encounter with a foreign text, can inadvertently rob the text of its alterity by too quickly making it too familiar. Every year that I have taught Dante's *Purgatorio*, a handful of students have dreadfully misinterpreted the poem due to an unreflective identification of Dante's love for Beatrice with the banal lusts they know from Britney Spears lyrics and the *American Pie* movies. While we simply cannot avoid making use of the familiar to parse the unfamiliar, we must always guard against reducing the unfamiliar to the familiar in the process. Otherwise, we can never be surprised by the texts we study, and we have at once insulated ourselves from not only the intellectual pleasure that follows from a puzzle well-solved but also the very possibility of engaging in any genuine learning. Alasdair MacIntyre rightly observes that "it is a great defect in too many of our students and in ourselves that they and we do not find enough of the world astonishing or puzzling[,] and one reason why they and we do not is that they and we too often think of all problems as puzzles internal to and to be solved in terms of the enquiries of the specialized disciplines" (MacIntyre 2).

One of the chief benefits of introducing first-year students to higher learning through an interdisciplinary team-taught course, as we do in Christ College, is that faculty, not to mention students, have plenty of opportunities to be puzzled and surprised. When a Christian theologian teaches Confucian texts, a literary critic teaches Kant, or a philosopher teaches Shakespeare, there should be neither delusions nor illusions of expertise. Consequently, the faculty has the opportunity and obligation to model for students an earnest and open engagement with unfamiliar but nonetheless important discursive modes, intellectual methods, texts, traditions of thought, and historical periods. Teaching outside one's area of professional expertise is, on this account, pedagogically desirable (rather than practically necessary), for it puts the

instructor in an analogous position to her students, both as the wide-eyed freshmen they are and as the lifelong learners we hope they will become. Christ College's commitment to interdisciplinarity as a key curricular instantiation of multiperspectivism extends even farther, all the way to class assignments. Lest our students grow overly comfortable with the particular perspective of the historian or political theorist who happens to be leading their discussions, instructors switch seminars midway through each semester! The student groups remain the same, thus preserving the bonds they have forged through seven weeks of dialogue, while a new instructor invariably introduces new intellectual and pedagogical resources into their ongoing conversation. Thus each year our students apprentice under as many as four accomplished and diverse practitioners of intellectual inquiry, and in so doing they and we are reminded how different perspectives can enhance, illumine, or challenge one another.

While multiperspectivism can thus motivate, direct, and expand the characteristic activity of the academy, namely, intellectual inquiry, it can also undermine that very same activity. Nietzsche's derisive characterization of liberally educated men in nineteenth-century Germany retains much of its force in our own day. They carry within them "enormous heap[s] of indigestible knowledge-stones"; they are "wandering encyclopedias" who have only meta-knowledge and no knowledge that is truly their own; they become "restless, dilettante spectator[s]" whom "even great wars and revolutions cannot affect . . . beyond the moment" (Nietzsche 23-24, and 29). Nietzsche, of course, laid the blame for this phenomenon on the rise of historicism and its capacity for making us painfully conscious of the plurality of perspectives that have existed through time. Beasts, unlike humans, have no such awareness, so they are active and, therefore, happy: "Forgetfulness is a property of all action" and of "the smallest and greatest happiness" (6). Though our contemporary practices of multiperspectivism have a different motive and object than those of nineteenth-century historicism, do they nonetheless have a similar effect on our students? My own experience in the classroom suggests that they certainly can and do. Who of us has not faced cynicism, detachment, restlessness, inattentiveness, and intellectual satiety among our students? Do not even the best and brightest in our care sometimes display a kind of casual nonchalance with respect to the weighty matters under our consideration, as though education is only a game, a self-enclosed field of mental activity with no reference at all to the 'real world' of private and public action? While these qualities in today's students certainly derive in part from the contemporary tyranny of the market (see, e.g., Wolterstorff), educators nurture, and sometimes sow, the seeds of student malaise when general education fails to move beyond its first task as I described it above, namely, to foster in our students an openness to the unfamiliar. Unaccompanied by a second, complementary task of general education, namely, to nurture intellectual responsibility, the first task readily degenerates into systematic disillusionment. This tendency is most obvious in the enormous disparity between time spent teaching critical skills (which are essential to the first task of general education) and the time spent in constructive modes of thought and action. At its worst, this tendency is manifest in the all-too-familiar phenomenon of cynical instructors gleefully demolishing their students' unreflective parochialisms. Critique

cannot be an end in itself; it always must be a prolegomenon to a more satisfying answer to a more important question. Insofar as we fail to model for and nurture in our students the dogged pursuit of better questions and better answers, we allow sloppy relativism to masquerade as intellectual humility, and we thus abandon the second task of general education, the formation of intellectual responsibility.

Christ College understands itself as an academic *community*, sharing common goals in a context of mutual responsibility, and so a number of our practices in the Freshman Program respond to this second task of general education. Participation in seminars provides students and faculty alike with daily opportunities to practice forming good questions and rigorously seeking their answers. In our weekly faculty seminar, we have lively and challenging discussions of the texts we are preparing to teach, and in our weekly plenary sessions, the faculty lecturer has as her interlocutors the whole Freshman Program, faculty and students. Team teaching thus removes individual faculty members from the isolation of their classrooms, where personal charisma, institutional authority, or old-fashioned inertia sometimes inhibit the pursuit of truth, and returns them to a larger community of discourse composed of both students and faculty peers. The Freshman Program also places a heavy emphasis on writing, and especially on writing as a public act. We stress argumentation and, therefore, the public criteria which make for sound arguments, including the writer's ethical obligation to take opposing positions seriously (see Williams 242). Moreover, we insist that in their written work, our first-years take a stand, and one that matters. Papers must not leave the reader asking, "So what?" The public character of intellectual work receives further attention in the annual Christ College Freshman Debates. Each spring, eight teams debate four topics over four nights before the entire college community and its guests, and at the end of each debate, the audience 'votes with its feet' by exiting the hall through doors corresponding to the affirmative or negative positions. Here the responsibility one owes to an intellectual opponent and to an audience could not be clearer.

The annual Freshman Production, like the Freshman Debates, places students in the roles of producers, rather than consumers, of discourse. In a scant twelve weeks, ninety students produce a completely original piece of musical theater that speaks to the issues addressed in their seminars. (For more on the Freshman Production, see Franson.) In the week after the production, the entire college gathers to discuss the meaning and merits of the Freshman Production, and this conversation is always characterized by both genuine praise and serious analysis. Invariably our first-years seem both humbled and ennobled by the community's thoughtful reflection upon their common work and amazed at just how much this work *means*. Having thus shared, perhaps for the first time, the perspective of the artist, their work as critics undergoes significant transformation in the semester's remaining weeks, for they have now experienced the act of interpretation as both self-investment and self-risk. The aloof indifference of the 'critic' quite noticeably gives way to the committed embodiment of the 'reader' (in Steiner's terms).

Thus multiperspectivism carries with it both peril and promise. As a means of intellectual inquiry, which I take to be the defining activity of the academy, multiperspectivism opens up the possibility of self-critique and therefore of learning at all. As

such it is essential to honors education. When multiperspectivism becomes an end in itself, however, we shape utopian students, citizens of 'no place' in particular. Lacking a substantive commitment to any particular human community, such students have the luxury of endlessly fiddling with ideas, of multiperspectivism in the worst sense of the word. But in the context of a community of intellectual inquiry, students and faculty have moral responsibilities to one another and to the truth which they seek together through their common endeavor. For this reason Nussbaum's proposal of 'cosmopolitanism' as the highest end of humanities education rings hollow, for to be a citizen of every place is to be a citizen of no place. While her emphasis on empathy as an intellectual virtue resonates with what I have here called humility, her vision of humanities pedagogy simply yields more wandering encyclopedias, stuffed with the stones of meta-knowledge and bereft of the kind of local knowledge that actually conduces to action. Empathy is best learned face-to-face, where our obligations to each other and to our common work, the search for truth, are more difficult to ignore. Only in community can multiperspectivism be saved from a banal relativism on the one hand and restless dilettantism on the other; only in robust communities of inquiry can the academy resolve its longstanding and legitimate ambivalence toward intellectual pluralism.

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